

Summary of work on HB70 (state fire suppression)

ENVIRONMENTAL QUALITY COUNCIL
MARCH 16, 2026

WHAT IS HB70?

House Bill 70 ([Study of state fire suppression](#)) requires the [Environmental Quality Council](#) to investigate:

- firefighting operations and management policies in Montana by the state and federal governments
- the efficient use of fire suppression resources
- the impact of operations on private land and use of private resources
- state and federal forest and grazing policies

WHAT'S IS THE EQC WORK PLAN FOR HB70?

- o Review of relevant laws, policies, legal decisions, budget related to wildland firefighting
- o Panel discussion(s) with relevant public officials (local, state, federal, tribal), landowners, contractors/industry
- o Summary of other states' policies
- o 1-2 add'l HB70-specific council meetings
- o Creation, meeting of subcommittees
- o Solicitation and consideration of public comments/input
- o Analysis of relevant laws, actions, policies, data, legal decisions, budgets, other states policies
- o Deliverables: report, legislation

WHAT HAS BEEN DONE?

July 29, 2025 agenda items

Introduction to topic	Review of 2009 Fire Suppression Interim Committee (Price of Flame); 11 of 38 proposed bills passed 2009 session
Legislative audit	Legislative Audit Division found the DNRC Fire Assessment Program could modernize to reflect current conditions, promote cost-reduction and improve fee administration.
Federal fire agencies	DNRC discussed presidential order , proposed closure of the Region 1 office in Missoula, and consolidation of Department of Interior firefighting (National Park Service, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Bureau of Indian Affairs, Bureau of Land Management) into a new U.S. Wildland Fire Service.
Wildfire data tool	Legislative Fiscal Division GIS-based data tool that maps historic fires with additional layers, such as land ownership, property values, fire perimeters.
Fire season update	DNRC reported roughly the same number of wildfires, but consuming less acres. Fire costs higher than recent years; Windy Rock fire near Drummond most costly.

<i>Oct. 23, 2025 agenda items</i>	<i>Summary</i>
<u>Background on state wildfire policy</u>	EQC staff highlighted relevant land and policies, including: Key statutes: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - <u>Protection of forest resources</u> (sets <u>state fire policy</u> for “aggressive and rapid initial attack,” burn permits) - <u>Local gov’t fire protection</u> (includes volunteers, fire districts) - <u>Liability for forest or range fires</u> (legal standard for civil action) Recent legislative studies (Price of Flame (2009); prescribed burning (2018); wildfire air quality (2022)) Recent legislation (HB84: Certified prescribed fire manager; HB490 PSC-approved “wildfire mitigation plan” for electric utilities) Who pays for protection depends on jurisdiction, protection, cooperation agreements; DNRC and 5 federal agencies sign on to Master Cooperative Agreement; DNRC and 400 local FDs have county-level fire agreements
Wildfires data tool	LFD developing “consumer version” of tool in coming months
2025 wildfire season update	Final of costs of 2025 wildfire season between \$60-\$80 million (DNRC)

Jan. 14, 2026 agenda items

Panel discussion: What has changed since 2009 report?	See p. 3 for summary of HB70 panel findings
Creation of council working groups	Four-member working groups on: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Funding for wildfire suppression - Wildland urban interface (WUI) - Wood products infrastructure/fuels treatment - Contracting of resources Working groups will report progress at March meeting and findings at May meeting.

WHAT'S ON THE MARCH 25 AGENDA?

- Review of study progress
- Update from HB70 working groups
- Federal firefighting agencies
 - Reorganization of federal wildland firefighting agencies
 - Federal perspective on changes since 2009 legislative report

WHAT COMES NEXT?

HB70 working groups submit findings to full council in May. Council may subsequently draft recommendations and legislation. Work plan will direct additional steps of the study, which may include states’ wildfire policies, or further legal or budget analysis.

HB70 PANEL* FINDINGS (OF JAN. 14)

Deteriorating forest and timber conditions. Pine beetle epidemics have increased tree mortality, resulting in poor forest conditions. Timber mortality exceeds the harvest rate, even as additional mitigation work is necessary for improved forest health.

Timber industry decline. Montana has lost 36 timber mills in 36 years, with 5 remaining. Only one processes ponderosa pine, which stands around many towns and homes and is particularly dry and flammable.

Firefighter response. Aggressive initial attack is identified as the most cost-effective wildfire suppression method.

Funding for wildland firefighting. The state firefighting budget has stabilized since 2009, especially with the passage of HB883. State sharing of firefighting resources with local fire units is also positive.

Contractor issues. Private wildland firefighting contractors continue to be overlooked by the federal procurement process.

Policy stagnation. Multiple stakeholders said the state has not made significant progress in wildfire prevention or forest management since the 2009 legislative report, although increased Good Neighbor Authority agreements and the federal Fix Our Forests Act are expected to have a positive impact.

Societal changes. More people are moving into the wildland urban interface, but are often less self-reliant and may have higher expectations of public services during fire events.

Secondary impacts. Beyond immediate fire damage, wildfires drain law enforcement, destroy roads and agricultural infrastructure, and create public health issues through hazardous air quality.

Private landowner mitigation. Private timber treatment project may have slowed or halted recent major fires.

HB70 PANEL RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Pre-position firefighting resources to enhance the state's aggressive initial attack policy.
2. Create a unified workforce that fights fires during the season and performs recovery or mitigation work in the off-season.
3. Increase the involvement of local governments in incident management teams (IMTs) for large, complex wildfires.
4. Increase timber removal to benefit forests and the timber industry.

* Panelists: Commissioner Jeff Burrows (Ravalli Co.); Rich Cowger, Columbus Rural Fire District chief; Wyatt Frampton, deputy forest administrator (DNRC); Sheriff Steve Holton (Ravalli Co.); Jason Jarrett, mutual aid coordinator (Gallatin Co. Sheriff's Office); Peter Kolb, MSU Extension forestry specialist; Patrick Lonergan, chief of emergency management and fire (Gallatin Co.); Ray Ragsdale, Broadus Volunteer Fire Dept. and Power River Co. fire warden; Julia Altemus, Montana Wood Products Association executive director; Kevin Erickson, Call When Needed Resources LLC; Jason Todhunter, Montana Logging Association regional representative; Meranda Warren, private wildland firefighting contractor